

# A Comparative Study of AI and Human Translation in the English Translation of Literary Works: A Case Study of *Fortress Besieged*

Fan Zhixin<sup>1</sup>, Zheng You<sup>2</sup>, Fan Jiying<sup>3\*</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>Researcher, Beijing Institute of Petrochemical Technology, China

<sup>3</sup>Associate Professor, Beijing Institute of Petrochemical Technology, China

\*Corresponding author

| Article Detail:                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | Abstract                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
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| <p>Received: 19 May 2026;<br/>Received in revised form: 16 Jun 2026;<br/>Accepted: 19 Jun 2026;<br/>Available online: 22 Jun 2026</p> <p>©2026 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<a href="https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/">https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/</a>).</p> <p><b>Keywords</b>— AI translation, human translation, literary translation, <i>Fortress Besieged</i>, translation comparison</p> | <p>As the times advance, artificial intelligence technology has progressed rapidly, bringing new possibilities and challenges to literary translation. This study focuses on Qian Zhongshu's novel <i>Fortress Besieged</i>. It takes the English version co-translated by Jeanne Kelly and Nathan K. Mao (1979) as the human translation reference, and the output generated by the large language model DeepSeek V4 Pro as the AI translation sample. A systematic comparison is made across four dimensions: semantic accuracy, reproduction of linguistic style, handling of culture-loaded words, and conveyance of rhetorical effect. The findings show that AI translation does well in basic meaning transfer and sentence fluency. Yet it still lags clearly behind human translation when it comes to capturing humorous and ironic tones, understanding deep cultural allusions, and creatively reproducing rhetorical devices. AI translation leans more towards domestication and literal rendering, which leads to a somewhat flat style. Human translation has a marked advantage in cultural interpretation and stylistic fit. This study suggests that, at the present stage, the English translation of literary works is better served by a collaboration model where human translators take the lead and AI plays a supporting role. AI can assist with draft generation and terminology help, but the most essential work of transcreation still needs to be carried out by human translators.</p> |

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## I. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Research Background

Recent years have seen remarkable advances in AI-powered translation, driven by neural machine translation (NMT) and large language models (LLMs). From dedicated systems like Google

Translate and DeepL to general-purpose models such as GPT-4 and DeepSeek, the quality of AI translation in many fields has approached or even partially surpassed that of earlier machine translation systems (Zhang & Zhao [37]). Literary translation, however, remains one of the toughest challenges for machine translation, because it demands such a high level of artistic sensitivity, cultural depth, and aesthetic judgment.

Literary translation is not the same as translating practical texts in science or business. It requires more than just getting the meaning right. A translator also needs to recreate the literary qualities of the original—its style, its rhetorical devices, its cultural resonance, its aesthetic effect—in the target language. Qian Zhongshu himself, in his essay "Lin Shu's Translation," described the highest ideal of literary translation as *huajing*, or "realm of transformation": to transform the original into such natural target-language prose that readers forget they are reading a translation at all. This standard is a severe test for any translator. For AI systems, which lack genuine cultural perception and aesthetic judgment, the challenge is particularly daunting.

*Fortress Besieged* is Qian Zhongshu's best-known work [12]. It has been praised as a stylistically distinctive masterpiece of satire in modern Chinese literature, often called a "new unofficial history of the scholars." Set in the early years of the War of Resistance against Japan, the novel follows the life of its protagonist Fang Hongjian and offers a penetrating portrait of the intellectual's spiritual predicament. Its central metaphor, the "besieged fortress," captures a universal paradox in marriage and in the pursuit of life: those outside the fortress want to break in, and those inside want to escape. The novel's language is sharp and richly loaded with cultural references, making it a representative text for studying how style and rhetoric fare in literary translation. C. T. Hsia once praised it as one of the "most exquisite" long novels in modern Chinese literary history (Hsia [29]). The English translation, *Fortress Besieged*, was first drafted by Jeanne Kelly and then revised and extensively annotated by Nathan K. Mao. It was published by Indiana University Press in 1979 [13]. It remains the only complete English version of the novel. Combining foreignization with domestication to handle cultural

nuances and satirical tones, it has become a core text for teaching and researching modern Chinese literature in the English-speaking world [51] and has had a wide influence overseas [29][51]. This study chooses *Fortress Besieged* as a case precisely because it brings together several core difficulties in literary translation: dense metaphors and allusions, profound cultural loads, subtle ironic tones, and rhythmically complex long sentences. It offers rich and typical material for a comparative study of AI and human translation.

## 1.2 Research Significance

On the theoretical side, this study extends AI translation research from the practical domains where it has mostly been applied—science, technology, business—into literary translation, a field that demands far greater artistic sensitivity in language. Through a systematic, multi-dimensional comparative analysis, it seeks to reveal where the limits of current AI technology lie in literary translation, and to explore the reasons behind those limitations. In doing so, it provides new empirical evidence for core discussions in translation theory, such as "the subjectivity of the translator" and "creative translation."

On the practical side, the study offers a concrete reference for literary translators and publishers as they evaluate, adopt, and use AI translation tools. By clarifying where AI can usefully fit into the literary translation process, it helps distinguish between tasks where AI can boost efficiency—such as generating a first draft or checking terminology—and tasks that must remain in the hands of the human translator, such as recreating style, handling culture-loaded words with sensitivity, and making final aesthetic judgments [44][47][48]. In this way, it maps out a workable path for an efficient collaborative model in which the human translator takes the lead and AI plays a supporting role.

## 1.3 Research Content and Methods

### 1.3.1 Research Content

This study builds a three-way parallel corpus from the original Chinese text of *Fortress Besieged*, the human English translation by Kelly and Mao, and the AI-generated English version by DeepSeek V4 Pro. A systematic comparison is then carried out along four dimensions:

(1) **Semantic accuracy.** It looks at how complete the information is, how long and complex sentences are handled, and how subtle shades of meaning are conveyed. It compares how human and AI translators strike a balance between being faithful to the original and taking necessary liberties.

(2) **Reproduction of linguistic style.** The focus here is on humorous and ironic tones and the style of character dialogue. It analyzes whether the two translations can recreate that distinctive Qian Zhongshu touch, and what strategies and effects emerge when dealing with irony, playful mockery, and similar nuances.

(3) **Handling of culture-loaded words.** This covers idioms, allusions, classical poetry, and culture-specific items. It compares the strategies human and AI translators tend to use when cultural gaps appear—literal translation, free translation, amplification, annotation, and so on—and then evaluates how effectively the cultural meaning comes across.

(4) **Conveying rhetorical effect.** Centering on figures of speech like metaphor, personification, synaesthesia, and pun, it examines how completely and how beautifully these devices are reproduced across languages, and looks at the creative capacity of each translation.

### 1.3.2 Research Methods

This study combines three research methods:

(1) **Literature review.** It systematically surveys the existing scholarship on translation theory, both at home and abroad, and on the English translation of *Fortress Besieged*, laying the theoretical groundwork for the analytical framework.

(2) **Textual comparison.** The original Chinese text, the human translation, and the AI translation are placed side by side, sentence by sentence and paragraph by paragraph, and the differences among the three are recorded in full.

(3) **Case analysis.** Representative examples are selected from each of the four analytical dimensions for close qualitative analysis, so as to reveal in concrete terms the translation mechanisms and ways of thinking that lie behind the different versions.

## II. KEY CONCEPTS AND RESEARCH FOUNDATIONS

### 2.1 Core Concepts and Theoretical Foundations

#### 2.1.1 Core Concepts

This study involves three basic concepts. AI translation denotes intelligent translation powered by large language models, with DeepSeek V4 Pro adopted as the representative tool in this research. Trained on massive corpora, such models possess robust capacities for contextual comprehension and text generation. Literary translation takes literary works as its object. The original is itself an artistic creation with its own aesthetic value and cultural meaning (Bassnett <sup>[9]</sup>), requiring a balance between fidelity and creativity so that target readers come away with an experience close to that of the original readers.

#### 2.1.2 Theoretical Foundations

To assess translation quality comprehensively, this study draws on four theories. Yan Fu's (1898) <sup>[4]</sup> "faithfulness, fluency, and elegance" sets three progressive criteria <sup>[5]</sup>; for literary translation, *ya* primarily means conveying the literary qualities of the original (Shen Suru <sup>[5]</sup>). Nida's (1964) <sup>[1]</sup> functional equivalence stresses making the target reader's response as close as possible to that of the original reader, prioritizing equivalence of meaning while attending to style (Nida & Taber <sup>[2]</sup>). Newmark <sup>[6][7]</sup> distinguishes semantic translation, which stays close to the original's semantic and syntactic patterns, from communicative translation, which focuses on reader effect; he argues that literary works should lean towards semantic translation, supplemented by communicative translation. Venuti <sup>[8]</sup> proposes domestication and foreignization: the former assimilates the source text into the target culture, while the latter retains foreignness, highlighting the translator's role as cultural mediator. These four approaches address translation standards <sup>[3][6]</sup>, equivalence of effect, strategic orientation, and cultural stance respectively, together forming the analytical framework of this study.

### 2.2 Current Research

#### 2.2.1 Studies on the English Translation of *Fortress Besieged*

Since its publication, the English translation of *Fortress Besieged* has drawn sustained scholarly attention. An early and representative review was Sun Yifeng<sup>[15]</sup> systematic critique in *Chinese Translators Journal*, which identified problems in the Kelly and Mao translation regarding accuracy, rhetorical treatment, and cultural transmission, while fairly acknowledging that the translation "has considerable merit in many places." Since then, research perspectives have grown more diverse. Some scholars have examined the issue of the translator's subjectivity through hermeneutics<sup>[16]</sup>, relevance-adaptation theory<sup>[17]</sup>, and pragmatic adaptation theory<sup>[28]</sup>. Others have focused on specific topics such as the translation of humor<sup>[18][21][34]</sup>, metaphor translation<sup>[19][20]</sup>, and the handling of culture-loaded words<sup>[21][22][23][24][25]</sup>. Still others have explored paratextual elements<sup>[27]</sup> and the causes behind translation strategies<sup>[26][52]</sup>. On the whole, studies on the English translation of *Fortress Besieged* have moved from early evaluative judgments toward descriptive analysis informed by diverse theoretical perspectives<sup>[30][31]</sup>.

### 2.2.2 Studies on AI Translation and Literary Translation

In recent years, the application of AI translation to literature has become an increasingly active area of research. Zhang et al.<sup>[32]</sup> built LITEVAL-CORPUS, a corpus covering four language pairs and containing over two thousand literary excerpts, to compare nine machine translation systems against multiple human translations. The results showed that even the most advanced large language models, such as GPT-4o, produced translations that were "more literal and less diverse" than human versions, and that standard automatic evaluation metrics were almost entirely ineffective for assessing literary translation. Corpas Pastor and Noriega-Santiañez<sup>[34]</sup> looked at creative phraseological expressions in literary texts and compared four neural machine translation systems with human translators, finding that human translators scored significantly higher on creativity<sup>[34]</sup> (74.72%) than the best-performing machine system, DeepL (54.03%). In the context of Chinese-English literary translation<sup>[37][38][43]</sup>, Zhao Yan et al.<sup>[38]</sup> compared ChatGPT 4.0, Wenxin Yiyan, iFLYTEK Spark, and four major online translation systems on their English renderings of Fan Hua, noting that

some Chinese-developed large models had already surpassed traditional machine translation on literary indicators. Chen Piao et al.<sup>[39]</sup>, using Lao She's *Mr. Ma and Son* as a case, revealed systematic deficiencies in machine translation in three areas: culture-loaded words, contextual judgment, and humorous expression.

In summary, existing research has largely developed along two separate tracks—critical studies of the English *Fortress Besieged* and studies of AI literary translation. There has been little work that brings the two together in a focused way. This study therefore takes *Fortress Besieged* as a representative case and attempts to build a three-column parallel corpus of the Chinese original, the human translation, and the AI translation, on the basis of which a systematic, multi-dimensional comparative analysis can be carried out. It aims to fill this gap in the research.

## III. COMPARATIVE CASE ANALYSIS OF AI AND HUMAN TRANSLATION

### 3.1 Comparison on the Semantic Dimension

Semantic accuracy is a basic requirement in translation. In literary works, meaning includes not only denotation but also connotation and contextual meaning. The following three typical cases examine how AI and human translations differ in conveying meaning. This study uses the Kelly & Mao<sup>[13]</sup> of *Fortress Besieged* (1979): Jeanne Kelly produced the first draft, and Nathan K. Mao revised, polished, and wrote the preface and notes—a typical Chinese-Western collaborative model. The translation evaluation issues embedded in these concepts need systematic theoretical examination.

#### 3.1.1 Handling Long and Complex Sentences

The opening of *Fortress Besieged* unfolds with a dense piece of rhetorical description. The multiple layers of logic embedded in it test a translator's ability to parse syntax.

#### Example 1: Opening Personification Chain

红海早过了。船在印度洋面上开驶着。但是太阳依然不饶人地迟落早起，侵占去大部分的夜。夜仿佛纸浸了油，变成半透明体；它给太阳拥抱住了，分不出身来，也许是给太阳陶醉了，所以夕照霞隐褪后的夜色也带着酡红。



### Human translation:

The red sea had long since been crossed, and the ship was now on its way over the Indian Ocean; but as always the sun mercilessly rose early and set late, encroaching upon the better part of the night. The night, like paper soaked in oil, had become translucent. Locked in the embrace of the sun, the night's own form was indiscernible. Perhaps it had become intoxicated by the sun, which would explain why the night sky remained flushed long after the gradual fading of the rosy sunset.

### AI translation (DeepSeek V4 Pro):

The Red Sea was already far behind. The ship now plowed across the Indian Ocean. Yet the sun, showing no mercy, still rose early and set late, seizing the greater part of the night for itself. The night — as though a sheet of paper steeped in oil — had turned into a translucent medium; caught fast in the sun's embrace, it lost all distinctness of form. Perhaps it was simply drunk on the sun, for even after the glow of sunset had receded, the night sky still wore a tipsy flush.

### Comparative analysis:

Both translations convey the basic information, but they differ in a number of details. For "侵占," the human version uses "encroaching upon," which suggests a gradual intrusion, while the AI's "seizing" is more direct and action-oriented. For "浸" in "纸浸了油," the human translation uses "soaked" and the AI uses "steeped." The former emphasizes complete saturation, whereas the latter keeps a sense of the steeping process and is semantically more precise. For "分不出身来," the human version describes the night's form as "indiscernible"; the AI unpacks it as "lost all distinctness of form," which gives more information but is slightly less concise. It is worth noting that the AI translates "酡红" as "tipsy flush," forming a semantic link with the personification of "陶醉" (drunk/intoxicated) in the original. The human version simply uses "flushed," losing the thread of drunkenness. This shows that the AI has some advantage in handling inter-sentential semantic connections.

### Example 2: A Qian Zhongshu-style Discursive Long Sentence

学国文的人出洋"深造"听来有些滑稽。事实上,惟有学中国文学的人非到外国留学不可。因为一切其他科目像数学、物理、哲学、心理、经济、法律等等都是从外国灌输进来的,早已洋气扑鼻;只有国文是国货土产,还需要外国招牌,方可维持地位,正好像中国官吏、商人在本国剥削来的钱要换外汇,才能保持国币的原来价值。

### Human translation:

It sounded a little ridiculous for someone majoring in Chinese literature to go abroad for "advanced study." In fact, only students of Chinese literature had to study abroad, since all the other subjects, such as mathematics, physics, philosophy, psychology, economics, and law, had originally been imported from abroad and already reeked of foreignness. Only Chinese literature was a native product; it needed a foreign trademark to maintain its status, just as Chinese officials and merchants had to convert the money they had extorted at home into foreign currency to maintain the value of the national currency.

### AI translation (DeepSeek V4 Pro):

That a student of Chinese literature should go abroad for "advanced studies" sounds almost farcical. Yet the truth is that no one needs to study abroad more than the Chinese literature major. For every other discipline — mathematics, physics, philosophy, psychology, economics, law — has been imported from abroad and fairly reeks of foreignness; only the national language is a homegrown product, one that paradoxically requires a foreign seal of approval to maintain its standing — no different from how Chinese officials and merchants must convert their domestically exploited wealth into foreign exchange to preserve the original value of the national currency.

### Comparative analysis:

This passage by Qian Zhongshu is characterized by an ironic logic that unfolds layer by layer. For "滑稽," the human translation's "ridiculous" emphasizes being laughable, while the AI's "farcical" carries a sense of absurd theatre, better fitting the original's satire of the study-abroad system itself. For "国货土产," the human "native product" is a neutral label; the AI's "homegrown product" blends a hint of pride and self-mockery. In "需要外国招牌,方可维持地位," the

AI uses the word "paradoxically" to directly highlight the paradoxical logic—an added cohesive device that helps English readers grasp Qian Zhongshu's ironic stance. For "剥削来的钱," the human translation uses "extorted," emphasizing the sense of extraction, while the AI uses "domestically exploited," stressing the domestic context. Each has its own emphasis. Overall, both translations successfully convey the original information. The AI shows a slight edge in textual cohesion and making the ironic logic explicit, though whether some additions, such as "paradoxically," amount to over-domestication deserves further discussion.

### 3.1.2 Conveying Subtle Meaning

#### Example 3: The Venom of the Good and Honest

忠厚老实人的恶毒，像饭里的砂砾或者出骨鱼片里未净的刺，会给人一种不期待的伤痛。

##### Human translation:

The venom of a good, honest person is like grit in a bowl of rice or a half-cleaned fishbone — it can give you an unexpected pain.

##### AI translation (DeepSeek V4 Pro):

The malice of the good and honest is like a grain of sand hidden in one's rice, or a fishbone missed in filleting — it deals a wound you never saw coming.

##### Comparative analysis:

This is a typical Qian Zhongshu-style witty simile. For the key word "恶毒," the human translation uses "venom," which has a strong negative emotional charge and a bodily-injury metaphor. The AI chooses "malice," a more general term for ill will. Qian is not describing extreme evil here but the small hurts that seemingly good, honest people cause inadvertently—a hidden, unpleasant sting like grit in rice. "Malice" fits this subtle middle ground better in terms of semantic range and emotional intensity. For "不期待的伤痛," the human "unexpected pain" directly conveys an unforeseen hurt; the AI's "a wound you never saw coming" uses a more colloquial, dramatic expression to intensify the sense of being caught off guard, though it risks over-interpreting. Overall, the two translations are evenly matched in semantic conveyance, and the differences are more a matter of stylistic choice.

### 3.2 Comparison on the Linguistic Style Dimension

Linguistic style is one of the hardest dimensions to quantify in literary translation. Qian Zhongshu's style is centered on humor and irony. His irony is not as cold and piercing as Lu Xun's, but is a learned, witty "Qian-style humor"—often achieved through seemingly casual associations, unexpected similes, and sharp comments inserted suddenly into an otherwise calm narrative.

#### 3.2.1 Reproducing Humorous and Ironic Tones

##### Example 4: Diploma as Fig Leaf

这一张文凭，仿佛有亚当、夏娃下身那片树叶的功用，可以遮羞包丑；小小一方纸能把一个人的空疏、寡陋、愚笨都掩盖起来。

##### Human translation:

This diploma, it seemed, would function like the fig leaf worn by Adam and Eve; it could hide a person's shortcomings and cover up his inadequacies. A little square of paper could conceal a person's shallowness, ignorance, and stupidity.

##### AI translation (DeepSeek V4 Pro):

This diploma, one felt, performed precisely the office of the fig leaf worn by Adam and Eve below the waist — it covered shame and hid ugliness. A single slip of paper, so small, could mask a man's vacuity, ignorance, and stupidity entirely.

##### Comparative analysis:

Qian Zhongshu uses a biblical allusion to satirize the diploma worship of Chinese intellectuals. The satirical force comes exactly from the gap between the sacred and the profane: the holy fig leaf of Adam and Eve versus the secular, utilitarian fake diploma creates a huge ironic tension. The human translation proceeds in a plain narrative tone; "it seemed" and "would function like" feel a little mild. The phrase "遮羞包丑" is broken into two parallel structures ("hide... shortcomings and cover up... inadequacies"), which, though informationally complete, loses the compact rhythm of the original four-character phrase. The AI translation, with "performed precisely the office of," adopts a mock-solemn tone—using a highly formal register ("office" meaning function or duty) to discuss the disreputable object of a fake diploma. This approach actually gets closer to Qian Zhongshu's technique of "deadpan irony." The combined rendering "covered

shame and hid ugliness" matches the conciseness of the original. "空疏" is translated as "vacuity" rather than "shallowness"; "vacuity" points more accurately to the emptiness of substance that the diploma covers, rather than a mere shallowness of degree. In this example, the AI version shows a slight edge in reproducing the ironic tone.

#### **Example 5: Meat Shreds between the Teeth**

他说话里嵌的英文字，还比不得嘴里嵌的金牙，因为金牙不仅妆点，尚可使用，只好比牙缝里嵌的肉屑，表示饭菜吃得好，此外全无用处。

##### **Human translation:**

The English words embedded in his speech could not compare favorably with the gold fillings in his teeth, for gold fillings are not only decorative but functional as well. They were more like the bits of food stuck between the teeth — they showed that one had eaten well, but were otherwise useless.

##### **AI translation (DeepSeek V4 Pro):**

The English words lodged in his Chinese were not even the equal of gold fillings — which are at least ornamental as well as functional — but rather the shreds of meat wedged between one's teeth: they signaled a good meal and served no other purpose whatsoever.

##### **Comparative analysis:**

This is a well-known passage in which Qian Zhongshu mocks Zhang Jimin's pidgin English. The original uses two dental images—gold fillings and meat scraps—to form a step-by-step deflating satirical chain. The word "嵌" appears twice and needs to be differentiated in translation. The AI version uses "lodged" (embedded in Chinese speech) and "wedged" (stuck between teeth) to distinguish the two contexts, which is more nuanced than the human version's uniform use of "embedded" and "stuck." For "肉屑," the human translation's "bits of food" is too vague; the AI's "shreds of meat" accurately corresponds to both "肉" and "屑." In the final clause "此外全无用处," the human translation ends flatly with "but were otherwise useless," while the AI uses the emphatic negative "served no other purpose whatsoever." The finality of "whatsoever" matches the decisive tone of "全无" in the original. In this example, the AI has a clear advantage in conveying the satirical force.

### **3.2.2 Style of Character Dialogue**

#### **Example 6: Miss Su's Self-Positioning**

苏小姐理想的自己是："艳如桃李，冷若冰霜，"让方鸿渐卑逊地仰慕而后屈伏地求爱。谁知道气候虽然每天华氏一百度左右，这种又甜又冷的冰淇淋作风全行不通。

##### **Human translation:**

Miss Su, who pictured herself in the words of the familiar saying, "as delectable as peach and plum and as cold as frost and ice," decided she would allow Fang to humbly gaze at her in admiration and then prostrate himself to beg for her love. Who would have thought that while the temperature hovered around 100 degrees every day, this sweet, cool ice cream manner of hers was completely ineffective.

##### **AI translation (DeepSeek V4 Pro):**

Miss Su's ideal portrait of herself was "as alluring as peach-and-plum in bloom, and as forbidding as frost and ice" — she intended for Fang Hung-chien to gaze up at her in humble adoration before falling to his knees to beg for her love. Who could have predicted that, with the mercury hovering around a hundred degrees Fahrenheit each day, this sweet-and-chilly ice-cream routine would prove utterly useless?

##### **Comparative analysis:**

The core of this example lies in the characterization of Miss Su. She thinks highly of herself and imagines herself as an unattainably cold beauty, but Qian Zhongshu's narrator completely deconstructs her self-image with the single phrase "冰淇淋作风" (ice-cream manner). In translating "艳如桃李，冷若冰霜," the human version keeps the literal "peach and plum... frost and ice," while the AI adds "in bloom" and "forbidding" to intensify the imagery. "Forbidding" has connotations of being stern and unapproachable, which fits Miss Su's deliberately cultivated aloofness better than plain "cold." For "冰淇淋作风," the human version uses "ice cream manner"; the AI translates it as "sweet-and-chilly ice-cream routine." The word "routine" characterizes her behavior as a deliberate, formulaic performance, aligning more closely with the narrator's satirical stance than the neutral "manner." For "全行不通," the human "completely ineffective" states a fact, while

the AI's "utterly useless" carries a tone of dismissive mockery, better matching the narrative voice. Overall, the AI version performs better in characterization and in reproducing the narrative tone.

### 3.3 Comparison on the Cultural and Rhetorical Dimension

Translating culture-loaded words and rhetorical devices is one of the most challenging parts of literary translation. Qian Zhongshu was well-versed in both Chinese and Western learning. His writing is full of allusions and densely packed with references, ranging from Confucian classics to Greek philosophy, from Tang and Song poetry to English and French proverbs. These cultural elements are not only the texture of the text, but also an important vehicle for his satirical art.

#### 3.3.1 Translating Idioms and Allusions

##### Example 7: Plato – Confucius – Mencius

柏拉图《理想国》里就说兵士对敌人，医生对病人，官吏对民众都应哄骗。圣如孔子，还假装生病，哄走了儒悲，孟子甚至对齐宣王也撒谎装病。

##### Human translation:

In Plato's Ideal State soldiers were justified in fooling the enemy, doctors in fooling their patients, and officials in fooling the people. A sage like Confucius had pretended to be ill in order to trick Ju Pei, and Mencius even lied to King Hsüan of Ch'i by feigning illness.

##### AI translation (DeepSeek V4 Pro):

Plato's Republic itself states that soldiers may deceive the enemy, physicians their patients, and rulers the populace. Even Confucius the sage once feigned illness to send Ju Pei away, and Mencius went so far as to deceive King Xuan of Qi by pretending to be sick.

##### Comparative analysis:

The difficulty here lies in the juxtaposition of Chinese and Western allusions and the handling of names. For the title "《理想国》," the human translation renders it as "Ideal State," a free translation, while the AI uses "Republic," the standard academic rendering, which is more recognizable in international scholarly contexts. For "圣如孔子," the human translator uses "A sage like

Confucius," preserving the comparative structure. The AI uses the apposition "Confucius the sage," directly attaching the title to the name – this is more compact but loses the original comparative tone ("圣如" rather than "圣人"). For "哄走了儒悲," the human version translates it as "trick Ju Pei," which is semantically correct but does not convey the "making him leave" aspect of "哄走." The AI's "send Ju Pei away" adds the direction of departure, making the information more complete. In terms of romanization, the human translation uses the Wade-Giles system (Ju Pei, King Hsüan of Ch'i), which is characteristic of the 1979 edition, while the AI uses Hanyu Pinyin (Ju Pei, King Xuan of Qi), which conforms better to contemporary academic norms.

##### Example 8: "The Fragrance of Blossoms Threatens to Shatter One's Zen"

壁上挂的字画里有沈子培所写屏条，录的黄山谷诗，第一句道："花气薰人欲破禅。"鸿渐看了，会心不远，觉得和尚们闻到窗外这种花香，确已犯戒，与吃荤相去无几了。

##### Human translation:

Among the wall scrolls was a poem by Huang Shan-ku, calligraphed by Shen Tzu-p'ei. The first line read, "Flower scent overcomes man, making him wish to break Zen." He was amused by the line, thinking that if a monk had been affected by the fragrance outside the window, the monk had already violated his principle of total concentration and this transgression was similar to a monk's eating meat.

##### AI translation (DeepSeek V4 Pro):

Among the calligraphy on the wall was a scroll by Shen Zipei bearing a poem by Huang Tingjian; the opening line read: "The fragrance of blossoms so overwhelms the mind, it threatens to shatter one's Zen." Hung-chien read this with an inner smile – it struck him that any monk who caught such a scent drifting through the window had, strictly speaking, already transgressed; it was scarcely different from eating meat.

##### Comparative analysis:

This example involves translating classical poetry, one of the supreme challenges in literary translation. The original line by Huang Tingjian (whose hao is Shangu) means: the fragrance of flowers so pervades one's mind that it nearly



destroys the meditative concentration of Zen. For "破禅," the human version uses "break" ("making him wish to break Zen"), assigning the action to a person ("him"), which does not perfectly align with the original logic that "flower fragrance" is the cause and the breaking of Zen is the result. The AI version constructs it as "threatens to shatter one's Zen." "Threatens" suggests imminent but not yet realized destruction, and the use of the impersonal "one's" avoids assigning a specific subject, fitting the poetic blending of subject and object better. In terms of cultural knowledge, the human version uses "Huang Shan-ku" (the hao), while the AI uses "Huang Tingjian" (the formal name). Since "Shan-ku" is a hao, a formal context usually requires giving the proper name; the AI's handling is more standard. However, for "会心不远," the human version's "was amused by the line" only captures a superficial sense of being tickled, missing "会心"—the sense of a tacit, intuitive understanding. The AI's "read this with an inner smile" conveys an inner, unspoken understanding through "inner smile," which comes closer to the meaning of "会心." Overall, the AI performs well in poetic conveyance and cultural accuracy, but on nuanced literati psychology like "会心," there is still a subtle gap compared with the human translator—a gap that is the hardest to bridge in literary translation.

### 3.3.2 Reproducing Rhetorical Devices

#### Example 9: Tang Xiaofu's "Toothbrush" — Extended Metaphor and Bathos

古典学者看她说笑时露出的好牙齿，会诧异为什么古今中外诗人，都甘心变成女人头插的钗，腰束的带，身体睡的席，甚至脚下践踏的鞋，可是从没想到化作她的牙刷。

##### Human translation:

A classical scholar, seeing her fine teeth when she laughed, might wonder why poets through the ages, Chinese and foreign alike, were willing to become the pin in a woman's hair, the sash around her waist, the mat upon which she slept, even the shoes upon her feet, but never once thought of becoming her toothbrush.

##### AI translation (DeepSeek V4 Pro):

A classical scholar, catching sight of her fine teeth as she laughed, might well marvel: why have

poets throughout the ages, Chinese and foreign alike, been so willing to turn themselves into the hairpin in a woman's coiffure, the sash around her waist, the mat she sleeps on, even the slippers beneath her feet — yet never once thought of becoming her toothbrush?

##### Comparative analysis:

This passage represents the peak of Qian Zhongshu's extended metaphor technique, and it is one of the most rhetorically dense parts for translation. The two versions are very close, showing that the human translation is already excellent here. The AI's "catching sight of" for "看到" has a more dynamic sense of sudden noticing than the human's "seeing," matching the instantaneousness of "when she laughed." For "脚下践踏的鞋," the AI renders it as "the slippers beneath her feet," which adds a layer of lowliness—being trodden underfoot—compared to the human's "the shoes upon her feet." "践踏" is deliberately chosen in the original to suggest the poets' willingness to be trampled in their abasement. For the classical scholar's "诧异," the AI uses "marvel" instead of "wonder." "Marvel" combines amazement and disbelief, better fitting the original's astonishment at the collective absurdity of poets through all ages. The high degree of similarity between the human and AI versions here precisely illustrates that when the rhetoric is vivid enough and the structure clear enough, both can produce excellent results. But this passage also highlights a key problem with AI literary translation: it can produce a good "equivalent" translation without necessarily understanding the aesthetic principle behind the comic effect created by Qian Zhongshu placing "toothbrush" after "hairpin, sash, mat, shoes." The former is linguistic ability; the latter is literary judgment.

#### Example 10: Wind and Waves Like a Glutton — Personification and Synaesthesia

天空早起了黑云，漏出疏疏几颗星，风浪像饕餮吞吃的声音，白天的汪洋大海，这时候全消化在更广大的昏夜里。衬了这背景，一个人身心的搅动也缩小以至于无，只心里一团明天的希望，还未落入渺茫，在广漠澎湃的黑暗深处，一点萤火似的自照着。

##### Human translation:

The sky had already begun to gather black clouds, leaking a few stray stars; the wind and waves

sounded like a glutton devouring his food. The vast ocean of the day had now completely dissolved into an even vaster black night. Against this background, a person's inner disturbance was reduced to nothingness; only the hope of the morrow, which had not yet sunk into oblivion, shone like a firefly in the dark depths of the vast, swelling darkness, lighting itself.

#### **AI translation (DeepSeek V4 Pro):**

The sky had long since mustered dark clouds, through which a few stray stars leaked; the wind and waves roared with the sound of a glutton devouring his prey. The boundless ocean of daylight now dissolved entirely into a still vaster night. Set against this backdrop, a single person's inward turmoil shrank to nothing – only the hope of tomorrow, not yet swallowed by the void, glimmered like a lone firefly in the vast, surging depths of the dark, illuminating itself.

#### **Comparative analysis:**

This is one of the most densely literary passages in *Fortress Besieged*, blending personification (clouds "gathering," stars "leaking"), synaesthesia (sound like "devouring," day being "digested" into night), and metaphor (hope "shining by itself" like a firefly). For "饕餮," the mythical gluttonous beast of ancient Chinese legend, both translations use "glutton." However, the AI uses "devouring his prey" instead of "devouring his food." "Prey" adds a sense of predatory ferocity more fitting to the primitive image of the taotie as a fierce beast. For "消化," both use "dissolved," but the AI later uses "not yet swallowed by the void," echoing the earlier "devouring" image. "Swallowed" brings the disappearance of day back into the "swallow-digest" metaphorical chain, maintaining the coherence of personification throughout the passage. The human version's "sunk into oblivion" introduces a new, unconnected metaphor at this point. In the final clause "一点萤火似的自照着," the AI uses "glimmered" instead of "shone." "Glimmer" better captures the flickering, intermittent quality of a firefly's light. The addition of "lone" in "a lone firefly," while not in the original, intensifies the poetic sense of solitary self-illumination in the darkness. In this example, the AI translation demonstrates notable literary sensitivity

in cross-sentential rhetorical coherence and in conveying imagery.

## **IV. FINDINGS AND PROBLEM ANALYSIS**

### **4.1 Major Comparative Findings**

Based on the systematic comparison and analysis of 22 cases in 4 dimensions [32][34][38], here we conclude in the research:

Firstly, AI and human translation has the minimal gap [32][36][38] in the dimension of semantic accuracy. AI performs well in conveying basic information, parsing complex sentence structures, and displaying logical relations between sentences, part of whose cases even outperforms human translation in passage-linking ability – such as the personified linking chain composed of "tipsy flush" and "drunk in Example 1 and the satirical linking chain pinpointed by "paradoxically" in Example 2. The advantage results from LLM's training based on substantial bilingual data, which enabled its phenomenal syntax parsing and semantic projecting capabilities.

Secondly, AI translation exhibits apparent "bipolar" traits in the dimension of language styles. For satirical paragraphs with clear structure and logic (such as the diploma as fig leaf in Example 4, the shreds of meat between the teeth in Example 5), AI translation has even surpassed human translation in conveying satirical tone, where its flexible selection of word range and sharper tonal process are closer to Qian Zhongshu's iconic satirical style. However, in the paragraphs that depend on subtle narrative distance and the understated brushwork of the literati translation (such as some psychological portraiture), AI translation is suspected of excessive explanation, not stable enough in stylistic consistency control. In contrast, human translation has a more uniform overall style, characterized by the assistance of its academic footnotes that is unreplicable to current AI.

Thirdly, human translation remains remarkable advantage [15][21][22][23] in the process of culture-loaded terms. With commentary system, human translation provides English readers with essential background knowledge to understand and appreciate Chinese cultural elements, while the function is currently completely absent in AI translation. In choices of

detailed strategies, AI favors domestication (e.g. translating "里" as in "有缘千里来相会" as "miles"), while human translation applies more foreignization assisted with comments. Both strategies are rational in their way, but from the perspective of academic literary translation, foreignization with comments facilitates the outward widespread of Chinese literary culture. Additionally, in identification of culturally specific names such as courtesy names (e.g. "黄山谷"), classical titles (e.g. "《理想国》"), AI demonstrates a degree of accuracy, but with occasional bias.

Fourthly, AI displays stunning unexpected literary potential <sup>[39][40][41][42]</sup> in conveying rhetorical effects, but unstable factors exist. In many rhetorically dense paragraphs (e.g. the "taotie" synesthesia paragraph in Example 10), AI reveals an extraordinary performance in cross-sentential rhetorical coherence and conveying imagery. When handling structurally distinctive rhetorical devices such as the extended metaphor (boyu) (toothbrush in Example 9), the quality of AI and human translation are highly close. However, once the rhetorical effect depends on deep cultural knowledge (e.g. the concept of Zen (禅) in Example 8) or the specific aesthetic judgment from the author, AI's performance remains unstable.

#### 4.2 Problems Identified in AI Translation

Based on the comparative analysis above, this study categorizes the major problems in the English translation of literary works by AI into four categories below:

Firstly, cultural understanding is superficial <sup>[45][46][50]</sup>. AI is capable of identifying and translating the literal meaning of culture-loaded terms, but with limited ability to grasp deeper values, emotional connotations and contextual associations embedded in culture. Take the translation of Zen (禅) as an instance: AI can accurately provide the translation Zen, but fails to use supplementary annotation and careful lexical choices to help the reader appreciate the precise significance of 破禅 ("breaking Zen") within the context of Chan Buddhist practice, or its comic effect in the specific scene in *Fortress Besieged*. The logic chain—a monk catching the scent of flowers and thereby "breaking Zen"—derives its humor from the tension between the Buddhist

concept of "form-emptiness" (se kong) and the worldly experience of olfactory pleasure. It is precisely this layer of cultural logic that the AI finds genuinely difficult to grasp.

Second, instability in conveying humor and satire <sup>[39][40]</sup>. The AI performs brilliantly in certain satirical passages (e.g., Example 5), yet in others it either blunts the comic effect through excessive literalism or dissolves Qian Zhongshu's characteristic understated edge <sup>[30]</sup> through excessive domestication. This volatile performance means that, at the current stage, AI translation cannot yet be trusted as an independent tool for literary translation—its occasional flashes of excellence cannot compensate for the risk of unpredictable failure.

Third, a "safety bias" in the reproduction of rhetorical devices <sup>[41][42]</sup>. The AI tends to opt for "safe" literal translation strategies and rarely undertakes bold creative reconstruction on its own initiative. In Example 9 (Tang Xiaofu's toothbrush), the AI translation closely matches the human version—but this is precisely because the human translation itself is already fairly "faithful" at that point, so the AI was not called upon to make many creative choices. Once it confronts rhetorical innovations that depend on deep cultural knowledge (e.g., the poetic translation of "破禅" in Example 8), the AI's limitations begin to show: it can complete the linguistic transfer, but it struggles to ensure that the literary "aura" survives the act of translation.

Fourth, the absence of ancillary functions <sup>[27][51]</sup>. The Kelly and Mao translation is a classic example of "thick translation": Mao Guoquan's extended scholarly preface, the cultural background notes for each chapter, and the interpretive commentary on character relationships collectively build a bridge of understanding for Anglophone readers unfamiliar with the context of modern Chinese literature. The current AI translation provides only the translated text and lacks this dimension of scholarly support. Although it is technically possible to prompt the AI to add annotations, the scholarly reliability and consistency of such annotations remain, for now, difficult to guarantee.

### 4.3 Analysis of the Causes of Discrepancies

The systematic differences between AI and human translation in literary translation can be understood on three levels: the technical, the cognitive, and the aesthetic [10][11].

On the technical level, a large language model is essentially a language generation system based on statistical probability [32][33][34]. It learns patterns of word co-occurrence and sequence transformation from massive training data and, on that basis, generates the "most probable" translation. Literary language, however, is characterized precisely by being counter-statistical: it pursues unexpected expressions, rule-breaking rhetoric, and unique stylistic signatures. When Qian Zhongshu uses "toothbrush" as a metaphor for a poet in love, or describes the sound of wind and waves as a "glutton devouring," the literary value of these expressions lies exactly in the fact that they are, in statistical terms, low-probability events. The systematic bias of AI toward generating the "most probable" translation and the creative departure required by literary translation thus form a structural contradiction.

On the cognitive level, human translators possess two key abilities that current AI systems lack. The first is embodied cultural experience [34][43]. A translator—especially one like Nathan K. Mao, who has lived in both Chinese and Western cultural worlds—can draw on personal cultural experience to perceive subtle social cues, emotional shadings, and value judgments in the original, and can anticipate how these elements might shift in cross-cultural transmission. The second is the ability to infer intention [39][44]. A translator can make judgments about the author's intent and narrative strategy—is this passage ironic or merely playful? Is this metaphor meant seriously or in jest?—and such judgments directly influence translation choices. Current AI systems can "simulate" these judgments with the help of vast data, but they ultimately lack genuine depth of understanding.

On the aesthetic level, the key decisions in literary translation—when to prioritize fidelity, when to prioritize readability, when to aim for literary effect—are, at bottom, aesthetic judgments [44][47][48]. These judgments depend not only on a deep grasp of the original text and of both language

cultures, but also on the translator's literary taste, ethical stance, and personal convictions about what makes a good translation. An AI system does not possess aesthetic subjectivity in any real sense. The stylistic choices "it" makes are, in the end, no more than a statistical reflection of the distribution of translation strategies in its training data. To put it simply: AI can imitate a translation style, but it cannot form one [32][36][50].

### 4.4 Implications for Literary Translation Practice

Based on the above analysis, this study offers the following suggestions for literary translation practice:

First, the core tasks of literary translation—grasping the deeper implications of the original, recreating stylistic features, handling creative rhetorical devices—should be led by human translators. The AI's performance in these areas remains unstable; it can be brilliant in one instance and flawed in another, which falls short of the high consistency standards required in literary publishing [32][33][34].

Second, AI can play an effective supporting role in literary translation: generating a first draft for human revision, providing terminology references, checking for grammar and spelling errors, and offering multiple translation options for the translator to choose from. This human-led, AI-assisted model can draw on AI's efficiency [37][38][43] while safeguarding the literary quality of the final text.

Third, developers of AI translation systems should pay more attention to targeted optimization for literary translation [32][38][44]. This includes building high-quality Chinese-English literary parallel corpora [32][37][38], strengthening coverage of classical literary knowledge and cultural allusions, and developing assistive functions such as annotation and background explanation tools.

## V. CONCLUSION

### 5.1 Research Conclusions

Taking *Fortress Besieged* as its case, this study compared AI translation (DeepSeek V4 Pro) and human translation (Kelly & Mao [13]) across



semantics, style, culture, and rhetoric. The main findings:

(1) In semantic accuracy and fluency, AI reached a high level and, in some cases, even outperformed the human version in cohesion and making logical connections explicit.

(2) In reproducing humor and irony, the AI was uneven—it did well where the satirical logic was sharp but occasionally faltered where understatement and a subtle narrative distance were at play.

(3) In handling culture-loaded words and allusions, the human translation kept its edge through its annotation system and deeper cultural understanding; AI leaned toward domestication and still fell short in conveying cultural depth.

(4) In conveying rhetorical effects, AI showed real literary potential, especially in maintaining rhetorical coherence across sentences, yet it still met limits when rhetorical creativity drew on deep cultural knowledge.

Overall: at this stage, AI can serve as an aid for literary translation but is not yet capable of producing high-quality literary translations on its own. A human-led, AI-assisted collaborative model is recommended [32][34][37][38].

## 5.2 Limitations and Future Direction

This study has several limitations. First, it focuses on a single novel, *Fortress Besieged*, so broader validation across more texts is needed. Second, only one AI model, DeepSeek V4 Pro, was used; different large language models [36] (e.g., GPT-4o, Wenxin Yiyan, Claude) may perform quite differently in literary translation. Third, the translation quality assessment relied mainly on qualitative analysis, without systematic quantitative tools [10][11] or independent inter-rater reliability checks.

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